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ABSTRACT

Since 1977, St. Clair County Community College (SCCCC) has initiated several activities to increase the importance of writing at the college. The first of these efforts was a self-study conference to examine past, current, and future approaches to the problem of student literacy. The results of the conference have been seen in subsequent efforts targeted at three different groups. First, collegewide faculty involvement has been encouraged through an instructor survey of the writing requirements of various disciplines; the dissemination of materials to faculty to improve their students' writing; the presentation of seminars and panel discussions on writing evaluation, writing across the curriculum, and the problem of student literacy at SCCCC. Secondly, efforts have been made to establish linkages with high school and college instructors in the area. These efforts have included a panel presentation of SCCCC's requirements for student writing for junior high and high school instructors, workshops for area English teachers, and participation in a literacy conference. Thirdly, student support of writing was fostered through additional orientation and assessment procedures, the promotion of English 50 as a refresher course without a remedial label, a review of the College Level Examination Program scoring procedures, and a library orientation project. Through such efforts, outreach has been extended to faculty, the community, and students. (AYC)

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A College Takes a Community Approach to Writing

by

Susanna Mason Defever

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Port Huron, Michigan

This paper was presented as part of a panel on "Models for Staff Development" at the Boyne Highlands Conference, The Winds of Change. Michigan Council of Teachers of English. October 11, 1980.

Other panelists included

Patricia Stock, Chair - University of Michigan

Richard Bailey - University of Michigan

Kathleen Drzick - Western Michigan University

Toby Fulwiler - Michigan Technologial University

Mark Smith - Northern Michigan University

Marilyn Wilson - Michigan State University

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Someone once said, "Whenever you blame some person or group by pointing your finger at them, stop and notice that there are three fingers pointing back at you. Perhaps those hidden three indicate that some of that blame is yours. If so, do something about your share first."

At St. Clair County Community College, that is what we began doing in 1977. It had been easy to blame the students, their high school English teachers, and the multi-choice, fill-in-the-blank addiction of our own colleagues for the poor student writing so evident in composition classes. It had been too easy, but not too helpful.

In the spring of 1977, the English faculty decided to use its remaining funds allotted for attendance at professionally-related conferences to set up our own self-study conference to look at what we were doing, had done, and could do about the problem of student literacy. The meeting was held one week-end in mid-August at the Ben Miller Inn in Goderich, Ontario, Canada. It was an intensive appraisal of our program offerings and course syllabi; it was also a consideration of the devaluation of writing and the deterioration of student writing skills. [1]

The writing program at SC[4] included the typical two semester sequence of freshman composition, strong and well-received technical writing courses, and a fledgling basic writing skills course, English 50. The latter was considered by many (even within the department) negatively, as a remedial (and probably ineffective) necessity.

That week-end discussions demonstrated individual concerns, revealed the need for greater cooperative action, and indicated our commitment to work to produce a more literate student. The results of our concern, cooperation, and commitment can be seen in the three-fold approach taken in the past three years to reach out for writing: first - to our own faculty; second - to our surrounding communities, especially to the high school English faculties, and third - to our students. Our goal continues to be to restore a sense of value to the concept of writing well.

Our first commitment was to reach out to involve our own diverse faculty; we knew that without their support, it would be difficult to reach the students. We needed to know how much writing was required in other courses, what types of writing, what the instructors had observed about student writing, and what we could do to help. Some members from other departments who we knew were also concerned about poor writing skills met with us to discuss the problem and to determine some procedures to reach instructors who did not seem to care.

One result of this meeting was a survey of all full-time instructional staff to discover the extent of student writing done in other disciplines and to learn how composition courses could prepare students more effectively for such writing experiences. Of the 100 surveys sent out, 37 were returned. The number was not as significant as was the wide cross-section that number represented: 23 from Liberal Arts and 14 from Vocational-Technical programs. Instructors represented courses in applied power, biology, business, economics, chemistry, communication media, fine arts, geography, history, industrial technology, law enforcement, office education, political science, physical education, nursing, psychology, sociology, youth services.

Of the 37 replies, 34 instructors required some student writing. Our concern was shared; communication was open. That spring, when we selected a new handbook for students, we requested and received from the company 35 extra copies for faculty members in other departments. We prepared a guide for an easy, quick reference to sections relating to the more common problems in student papers. Near exam time, we xeroxed information regarding essay questions, so those who planned to include an essay section could be helped to write better questions or help their students to write better answers. Together we were beginning to create an environment for learning and for writing.

The fall of 1977 also began our reaching out to colleagues on the intermediate and secondary school faculties. A regional MCTE (Michigan Council of Teachers of English) meeting was held at the SC^4 College Center, and we were invited to have a panel discuss what is expected of students entering the community college, especially in writing skills, and what is taught in our English classes. We enjoyed this exchange so much that plans were made for an after school (4 to 7 p.m.) workshop for area English teachers. The first was held in the fall of 1978. The format was not unusual; the workshops sought to be practical, with handouts for immediate use. Two sessions found space on the 1979 program of the MCTE state meeting in Kalamazoo. In the spring of 1980, we also invited English instructors from Lambton Community College in Sarnia, Ontario, Canada, to cross the Blue Water International Bridge and join us at the workshops and dinner. Two new features were the Materials Exchange Table and the Free Books Corner. The first consisted of such teaching aids as handouts on writing exercises; the second made available old texts and extra publishers' copies that we hoped would be helpful to others.

It has been exciting to extend and exchange ideas and methods beyond our college to English teachers in and around our district and across the river to our Canadian friends. Our workshops also gained the support and publicity of the local press. Several articles applauded the "Back-to-the-Pen" movement. This reaching out with one hand to our own colleagues in other disciplines at the college and with the other to our English colleagues in other schools on all levels has strengthened our writing program through a significant break-down of the insularity and isolation of previous patterns of teaching.

These efforts may have been isolated and fragmentary spurts of energy, except for a sense of direction and involvement on a larger scale that crystallized in May, 1978, when the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts at the University of Michigan held its first conference to share the results of a three year self-study which had led to the creation of its English Composition Board (ECB).

The theme for the conference was shared responsibility in the teaching of composition and literacy. Teachers and administrators from all levels of education, both public and private, were invited to attend. Response exceeded the expectation of the U of M planners. Over five hundred participants from 234 high schools and colleges attended. The morning speakers explained the proposed program for the writing assessment of entering students and the new writing requirements for freshmen and upperclassmen. The afternoon speakers presented different views on the significance of improved writing skills for college students and graduates in disciplines other than English. We realized, not only through the university's projected program, but through the comments of others attending the day's conference, that we were part of a significant trend in the teaching of writing in Michigan.

That conference had occurred within months of our own faculty survey. The survey had demonstrated the scope of the community college problem; the conference helped determine the procedure for acting. Two projects were planned to further encourage across-the-curriculum writing-awareness. First, a panel discussion on "The Problem of Student Literacy at SC^4" was presented to the entire instructional staff at the opening day session of the college in August.

Although the panel was moderated by an English instructor, the presentation was given by concerned instructors in biology, sociology, applied power, and business administration. They did an excellent job presenting the problems of student literacy at the community college and the need for all instructors to encourage good writing. There was conviction in his voice as the applied power instructor spoke for the literate mechanic: the difference between the mechanic and the literate mechanic is the difference between mere training and vocational education. "We cannot gear our classes," he emphasized, "for the non-reader and the non-writer."

The keynote speaker that day was Dr. John Rouche from the University of Texas who also emphasized the declining literacy level in higher education and the need for all instructors in all areas to work together to reverse this trend.

The second project that year was in January, 1979, when we took advantage of U of M's outreach program on writing to have two members of the English Composition Board present an in-service seminar. In the morning they worked with the entire community college faculty in a workshop on evaluating samples of student writing and encouraging a cross-discipline writing emphasis at the college. In the afternoon they worked with the SC^4 English instructors and 24 high school teachers from 10 area schools in a second intensive writing workshop.[2]

The most important result of our "let's be aware and share" approach was the effect it had on our reaching out to our students. A faculty committee on student orientation and assessment implemented a new orientation program that summer. Reading and writing assessments (given to determine whether a student should be advised to take Reading 50 and/or English 50) are an important part of the program. Members of the English staff prepare the writing assessments and do the reading and evaluating of the written essays. As the community college has an open-door policy, the assessments and orientation are voluntary; however, the program has helped us to reach and advise more students.

In addition to the assessment program, English 101 instructors all use some form of diagnostic essay writing in the first week of classes to determine skill levels and writing problems and , if possible, to channel other students who may need it into the skills course. English 50 offerings have expanded to five classes each semester with night sections when needed and a summer session. Some students elect to take the course between English 101 and English 102 when they realize their own writing problems. English 50 is now acknowledged by both faculty and students more for its positive approach as a refresher course and not with the negative scorn usually given the remedial label. Instructors of the composition courses can now teach the writing process from an organizational and developmental approach rather than from the corrective and grammatical. The staff at the Student Learning Center also works closely with instructors in its tutorial program for individual writing problems.

In the fall of 1980, the English department achieved another first. For too many years, students had been able to CLEP out of composition courses with an objective CLEP test. Perhaps because of the new "climate" and the rapport established with other disciplines regarding the concerns we share about the values of the total writing program, we were able to gain support for a review of the CLEP test and the scoring procedure. This led to a change in the test

given. The new test requires students to write essays in addition to the more difficult, comprehensive objective test. The essays are read and evaluated by English instructors to determine whether or not the student writers demonstrate writing skills adequate for college work.

Our out-reach circle would not be complete without a mention of the shared project on library orientation that the English department has with the SC[4] Learning Resources Center. The program was jointly developed by the librarians and the English instructors in 1977-78 and is an extensive three session orientation required of all English 101 students and is given over a period of ten days. Class time is not used; students sign up for the three sessions at times convenient to their class and work schedules. Each year over 750 students are instructed in the use of the various LRC facilities such as the card catalog, the periodical indexes, and the microfilm readers. Filmstrip presentations are given by the librarians. Following each presentation, the students do exercises to reinforce the material and concepts given. These are corrected by the librarians and returned to the instructors for class use. When students take English 102 in which they do a research paper, the LRC staff individualizes the orientations more on the techniques for successful research according to the needs of the class and instructor.

A teacher of writing should write. An exciting, innovative exhibit is planned for December in the Fine Arts gallery to focus on the English teacher as a creative writer. Creative writing done by some of the full-time, part-time, present, and former English teachers from the college will be presented in a variety of visual displays. The idea is the brainchild of a member of the Fine Arts staff who coordinates gallery activities: "The intent of the exhibition is to bring to the community the artistic efforts of creative writers and to illustrate the beauty and power of language as a visual art."[3]

Our activities to reach out to others are not funded by any grant; instead they have caused us to reach into our own reserves for ingenuity and determination. We do not go out to schools yet; we have asked them to come in. We try not to be too pushy about more writing across the curriculum; we do try to encourage it as often as possible on an individual and friendly basis. We do not have a large program; we only foster smaller outreach projects. Our goal is, perhaps, changing attitudes, making writing important at the community college.

Instead of pointing a finger at the student, or the colleague, or the former teacher, we have extended the whole hand, and, though the grasp may not yet be secure and confident, the touch has been both rewarding and promising.

Endnotes

[1]St. Clair County Community College is located in Port Huron, Michigan, and was established in 1923 as the Port Huron Junior College. It changed to a county-wide community college in 1968. The English department includes ten full-time instructors and between 15-20 part-time instructors. Only the full-time instructors were involved in the Ben Miller conference.

[2]The U of M ECB outreach program, supported primarily by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, conducted seminars in over 250 secondary schools, community colleges, and four year colleges and universities, both in and outside the state of Michigan. In addition, the emphasis on shared concerns and commitments brought 300 high school and college instructors to one of two 3-day intensive writing workshops in June, 1979 and June, 1980.

In June, 1981, a three day conference on "Literacy in the 1980's" brought many of these teachers together again. This time the conference was preceded by a three day intensive writing workshop for 150 teachers from eleven states and the District of Columbia and was followed by an intensive workshop for the 150 Michigan teachers. The literacy conference overlapped the attendance of the two groups and allowed for another form of shared awareness and responsibility building.

An important part of the outreach program has been the publication of fforum, a journal published by the ECB and devoted to discussions of various approaches to the teaching of writing. It is sent, free of charge, to anyone who requests placement on the mailing list.

[3] The exhibit was well-received by students, faculty, and the community. It traveled to Sarnia, Ontario, Canada, as a special exhibit at the Lambton Community College. Most of the exhibit was also filmed and a slide presentation given at the MCTE spring meeting in 1981 for interested teachers.

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